



## LIVING ON THE EDGE?

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## LIVING ON THE EDGE?

### Periphery and perspective in Tobias Zielony's urban landscapes

*Housing estates, satellite cities and other formerly idealistic social housing projects are subject to certain modes of representation that often affirm the notion of centre and periphery. The analysis of two series by German photographer Tobias Zielony shot on the outskirts of Marseille, France (Quartiers Nord, 2003) and Halle, Germany (Ha Neu, 2003) shows that these representations may be challenged. By adopting a particularly individual perspective, Zielony underlines photography's ability to inspire change in our perception of what might be marginal.*

German photographer Tobias Zielony makes pictures of adolescents hanging out at night in car parks, doorways and playgrounds in suburban areas (*Quartiers Nord*, 2003; *Ha Neu*, 2003). He mingles with prostitutes and call boys to get close-up impressions of their scene (*Big Sexyland*, 2006; *Jenny Jenny*, 2013). His series bear the names of troubled small towns or satellite cities associated with unemployment, drug abuse or minorities' struggles: *Chemnitz* (2002), *Trona* (2008), *Manitoba* (2009–2011).

Since his first published series, *Car Park*, made in Bristol in 2000, Zielony has continued to turn his camera to marginal phenomena and places that initially do not lend themselves to aesthetic interpretation. This is supported by his education in both documentary and artistic photography, gained at the University of Wales in Newport and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig. The titles of his series reflect his manifest interest in structural changes and urban landscapes, and most series feature shots of the locations within these spaces. Despite the series often being named after locations, his focus lies on the visual language, gestures and poses the adolescents employ in appropriating their environment. This specific approach of portraying a place through its inhabitants is the subject of this essay. More specifically, it is about places in the so-called periphery. In what way, I ask, are photographic perspective and the notion of periphery correlated?

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### Individual perspective in *Quartiers Nord* (2003)

Zielony's series *Quartiers Nord* was shot in northern Marseille in 2003. It is the name of a banlieue dominated by large-scale housing projects. The series consists of eight images. They were taken by night in the artificial light of street lamps and neon tubes. All images in this series feature people, and all except for one were made in a public space. The photographs show adolescents against the backdrop of streets, parking lots, facades, cars and entrances to multi-storey complexes. A girl in a short dress speaks on a cell phone, her shadow lingering



Fig. 1 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord* — *La Busserine*, 2003, C-Print, 69 × 46 cm. © Tobias Zielony.



Fig. 2 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Abdilla*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

like a ghostly presence behind her on the rugged surface of a garage door (*La Busserine*, Figure 1). A young man sporting a baseball cap, a key chain around his neck and a lollipop in his mouth is portrayed in front of a prefabricated residential high-rise, looking intently at something outside the picture frame (*Abdilla*, Figure 2). Zielony framed him in the centre of the image with two street lamps on the left- and right-hand sides of the picture, which give off an auratic glow. Another photograph is a portrait of a young man, averting his eyes from the camera, his blue shirt harmonizing with the colour of the tiled wall behind him (*Malcom*, Figure 3). The other five images show different groups of adolescents. They are standing in entrance ways, all facing the street as if waiting for someone (*Entrée-2*, Figure 4). Or they are leaning against parked cars (*Renault 19*, Figure 5). A young man is walking on the sidewalk in a casual manner, his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, with another person in a similar outfit close behind him (*Promeneur*, Figure 6). In one image (*Entrée-1*, Figure 7), it looks as if two people are involved in some kind of suspicious business in the corner of a brightly lit entryway, the other two on the lookout to cover for them.

Only one image was taken inside of a building (*Groupe 7*, Figure 8). It shows seven young men dressed in sports clothing posing arm in arm for the camera. Mottled walls show signs of decay; a bright fluorescent light gives the room an unwelcoming atmosphere. Yet the youths seem content, at ease with their hip hop inspired style and eager to present themselves. Otherwise, Zielony shows these young people gathering in places of transit: in front of garages and entrances; in the parking lot. Possibly there are no better alternatives in their neighbourhoods. But one cannot help but wonder if they chose these meeting places because they would also allow them to disperse quickly, should this be

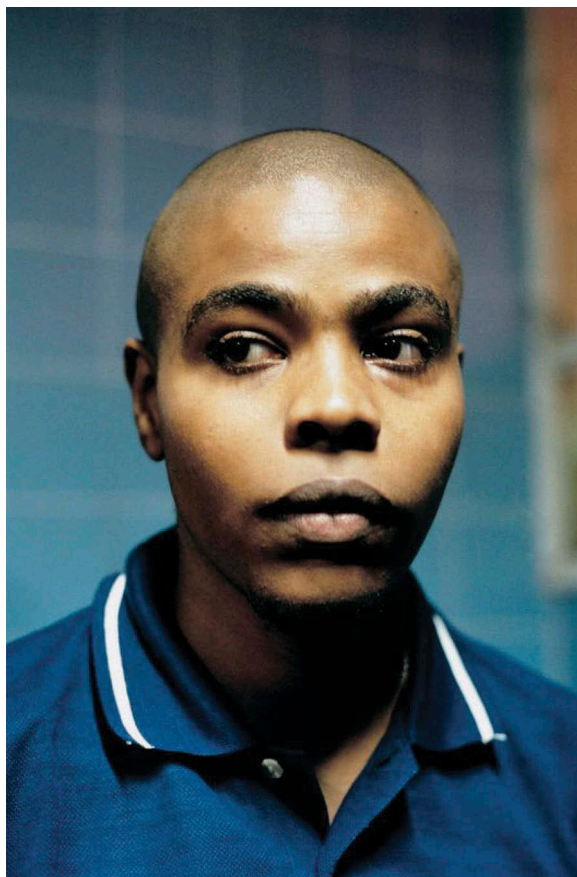


Fig. 3 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Malcom*, 2003, C-Print, 69 × 46 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

necessary. After all, their choice of hangout is reminiscent of the kinds of meetings that the then-minister Nicolas Sarkozy would criminalize two years later, in the wake of the infamous 2005 uprisings in the French banlieues, when article five of the state of emergency law gave power to the *préfets* to “ban any meetings or gatherings of people that might provoke or maintain disorder”.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Quartiers Nord are known for high rates of unemployment and criminality and were dubbed “the Third World” by the local police supports this idea.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is crucial to reflect this topic with awareness of a certain bias. Today’s notion of the French banlieues is strongly influenced by the media coverage of the 2005 riots, when dismal grid facades accentuated the array of burning cars in the foreground and promoted the impression of criminal satellite cities.

Hence we might question in what way these images represent the Quartiers Nord, as the title suggests, or a more general view of the French banlieues, and in what way they might challenge our visual preconceptions thereof.





Fig. 4 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Entrée-2*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.



Fig. 5 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Renault 19*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

Quartiers Nord is a vast residential area with approximately 250,000 inhabitants, most of whom live in large-scale housing projects built in the 1960s. They were part of a nationwide programme that the French government orchestrated in order to confront the substandard living conditions that affected 30%

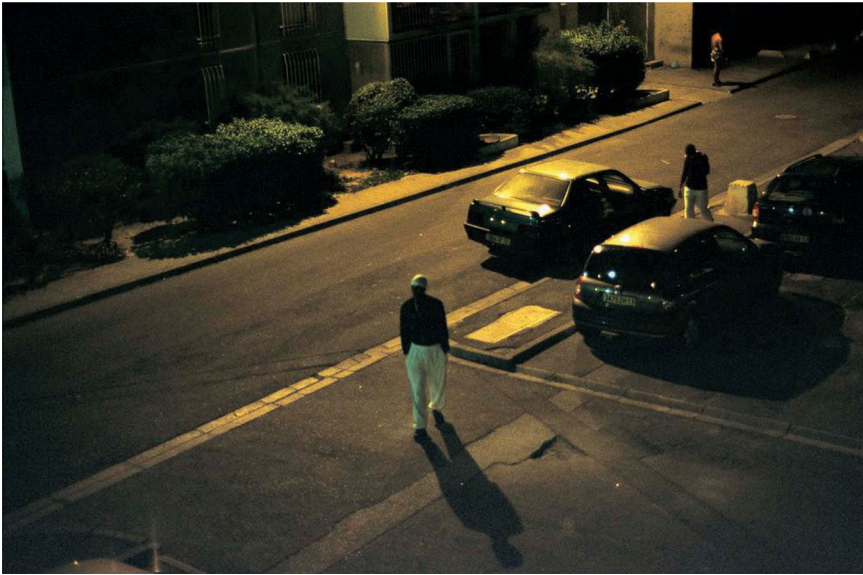


Fig. 6. Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Promeneur*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.



Fig. 7 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Entrée-1*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

of France's population after World War II. These housing estates seemed to be a much-needed, even visionary solution to a widespread housing crisis when they were first established. Their implementation required a certain form of representation. Because of their striking novelty, the French government felt a





Fig. 8 Tobias Zielony, *Quartiers Nord — Groupe 7*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

necessity to convey their advantages in large-scale media campaigns, projecting an image of triumphant modernization. In her analysis of these campaigns' visual strategies, Raphaële Bertho demonstrates how the institutional iconography at first brought forth the notion of a visionary state, seen as the builder of ideal modern housing complexes.<sup>3</sup> Aerial views were especially well suited to the task of highlighting the grandeur and splendour of these designs. They typically show overwhelmingly clean, organized and modern estates amidst greenery from an oblique bird's-eye view. The panoramic view results in a quite abstracted image without details, promising a bright new future in the modern estates.

Bertho shows that this type of institutional aerial perspective is adopted from a formerly avant-garde stance, promoted by architects like Le Corbusier as a tool to uncover a status quo in need of improvement and to legitimize revolutionary urban planning.<sup>4</sup> City officials adopted this very aesthetic for the promotion of their vision of modern urbanism. The images they circulated do not forebode the social or structural problems that would arise shortly after the completion of most of the mass housing estates.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, Zielony's series *Quartiers Nord* completely lacks this panoramic vision. Despite the suggestive title of the series and Zielony's great interest in precarious places,<sup>6</sup> it does not explore the location by representing the high-rises in a direct documentary manner that suggests a fairly objective insight into the district. Rather, the photographer documents the neighbourhood through its adolescent inhabitants and their way to position themselves in the spaces that surround them. In so doing, the artist adopted an individual perspective: Zielony approached the adolescents as if he were — for a short amount of time — a



part of their group. Borrowing the aesthetic of a documentary approach that rejects staging, he portrays them at eye level, capturing them doing nothing in particular, as if he were simply hanging out with a group of friends on any given evening during the week.

Zielony's images reveal adolescents' practices of appropriation of the space. Especially in the way they meet in places that are not designed to serve as gathering places, but rather as places of transit: the street, the entrance, the garage. Zielony's protagonists make these places their own. Although these images are clearly taken at urban peripheries, these young people convey the feeling that they do not seem to feel excluded or marginalized in any way. They live there, hang out there, call this place their own. Their peer group seems to be their centre. It would have been an easy task for Zielony to show the kind of decay, social segregation or stereotyping that would confirm the banlieue's negative reputation, especially in the wake of the international rise of "ruin lust" associated with the failure of the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> And this is not to say that it is not clear from these images that various cultural, economic and social forces might play a key role in shaping the lives of these adolescents. Their cultural background, way of dressing and their home address will most likely influence their social lives and career prospects. Zielony, however, excludes judgement from his images and rather conveys interest in their style, their habitus and their hangouts. He immerses himself in their groups and briefly becomes part of them, portraying them as the teenagers that they are, at eye-level. This is the specific perspective that Zielony chooses to take, one that could be called an individual or subjective perspective.

The juxtaposition of panoramic and individual view is the subject of an observation that Michel de Certeau presented in his 1980 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*.<sup>8</sup> In his study of urban viewpoints, power structures and everyday acts of appropriation, he distinguishes between the panoramic overview from an elevated position, which he associates with the panoptical visual regime of institutions, governments and administrations at the centre of a society, and the individual perspective, which for him is expressed in daily actions and subversive tactics of the individual on the periphery.<sup>9</sup> Subversive everyday acts, for de Certeau, enable those on the periphery to become politically empowered by appropriating the rituals and representations imposed upon them.

As one of the most influential poststructuralists, de Certeau argues that the

ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below", below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk — an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandermänner*, whose bodies follow the ups and downs of the urban "text" they write without being able to read it.<sup>10</sup>

The abstracted view from above gives the institutions an image to read, but this image is "written" by the people walking the streets down below. Both sides are oblivious to the other's perspective in juxtaposed power structures. De Certeau diverts attention from the power of institutions and instead highlights the relevance of the users of the city, the performers, the practitioners, whom

he does not see as passive receivers of instructions but as active agents who appropriate given structures and thus exert a form of power. De Certeau's interpretation of the relevance of the "practitioners" of the city can be related to Zielony's particular approach of immersing himself in the everyday life of the individuals he portrays. The adolescents are appropriating their surroundings by using the streets and gathering on their own terms. They seem to confidently own their "hood". Zielony's eye-level reportage from the urban margins is the opposite of the patronizing post-war official visual policy in France, the kind of perspective that can be related to de Certeau's description of the abstract, institutional perspective.

In recent decades, this institutional perspective on the housing estates in the French urban periphery underwent changes. Few European countries produced an image of the mass housing estates as negative as in France. As early as 1973, the form of urbanization generally known as "The Grands Ensembles" was officially declared a failure in France and this building policy came to a halt. That year marked the beginning of a policy aimed at revitalizing troubled urban areas. Once again, as Raphaële Bertho has analysed, photographs closely accompanied these efforts to "humanize the concrete" in the 1970s and 1980s, to document and legitimize a state intervention now based on the general consensus that the Grands Ensembles had been a failure.<sup>11</sup> They were perceived as all the ills of the contemporary city, as responsible for a social breakdown stemming from lack of infrastructure and geographic isolation. To justify broad renovation



Fig. 9 Tobias Zielony, *Ha Neu — Silberhöhe-2*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. Tobias Zielony, *Ha Neu* (2003). © Tobias Zielony.

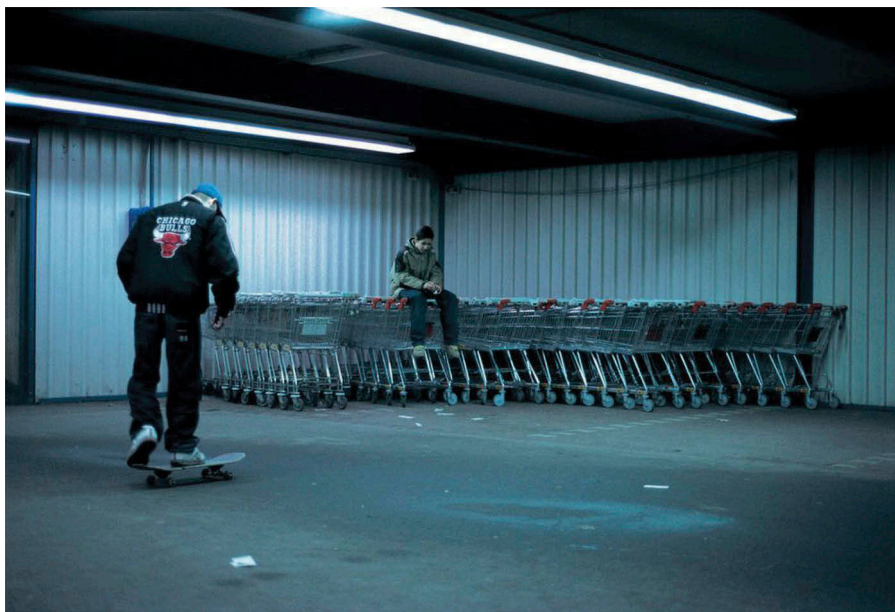


Fig. 10 Tobias Zielony, *Ha Neu — Skate*, 2003, C-Print, 46 × 69 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

efforts, government departments produced colour photographs of the catastrophic state most of the buildings were in. Bertho points out that the French government now used close-ups in order to communicate the state of decay. In Zielony's images of the *Quartiers Nord*, signs of decay, social segregation or other factors that have led to the diminishing reputation of the housing estates can be found only in the background or the broader context of the images. Instead, Zielony chose to represent the young inhabitants of these spaces as human beings in search of their own form of expression. In this, his pictures suggest, they are no different from other adolescents, living in different places.

### Skating and smoking in *Ha Neu* (2003)

Similar strategies of spatial appropriation can be found in Zielony's series *Ha Neu*, dating from the same year 2003. It shows adolescents smoking, skating and hanging out amidst prefabricated and standardized surroundings (*Silberhöhe-2*, *Skate*, *Sommer*, *Südpark-2*, [Figures 9–12](#)). Again Zielony chose as the location for his photographs a very contested kind of environment. *Ha Neu* is short for Halle Neustadt, a city in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that was built in 1967 to accommodate workers from the nearby factories. With the development of the industry the population grew quickly: by 1980, 90,000 people lived in Halle Neustadt. After the German reunification, Halle Neustadt merged with the nearby city of Halle, thus transforming from an autonomous city to a suburb. The end of the GDR brought with it the deconstruction of East German



Fig. 11 Tobias Zielony, *Ha Neu — Sommer*, 2003, C-Print, 69 × 46 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

industry, and the town has, like many other East German towns, suffered from extreme population loss. In 2010, half the dwellings stood empty, resulting in disrepair and subsequent demolition. The former high-density living environment has become a shrinking city, like so many around it.<sup>12</sup>

As with *Quartiers Nord*, Zielony's *Ha Neu* series also refrains from indulging in "ruin lust". He has, however, included shots of the standardized residential towers surrounding the adolescents' meeting places. Zielony took them from a ground-level view, a pedestrian perspective, and they provide an atmosphere more than anything else. Again the artist adopted a very individual approach and it is once more the young inhabitants that the artist chose to focus on. This is despite the series being named after the suburban town. Zielony shows the adolescents skating, which is per se a form of spatial appropriation and enunciation (Figure 10),<sup>13</sup> or smoking in public spaces — probably secretly, a classically subversive act of teenagers (Figure 12). In front of the residential high-rise buildings, on the sidewalk or around a ping-pong table (Figure 9), the teenagers are owning the public space by simply gathering here.





Fig. 12 Tobias Zielony, *Ha Neu — Südpark-2*, 2003, C-Print, 69 × 46 cm. © Tobias Zielony.

With his reading of the two differing perspectives on cities, de Certeau is challenging the relation of centre and periphery by attributing subversive but active power to the subjects on the margins, that thus gain a form of leverage — at least in theory.<sup>14</sup> Everyday and seemingly trivial practices of operating on the margins of what is visible to the institutional powers challenge the established boundaries between inside and outside, included and excluded.<sup>15</sup> Through everyday practices of appropriation, the residents produce their very own urban environment.

With his individual approach to his subjects, Zielony embodies this kind of thinking. His perspective on these teenagers is not one of marginalization. Instead, his images acknowledge their agency and their commitment to their social space.

### **Conclusion: a matter of perspective**

When, two years after these images were taken, the aforementioned riots erupted in a large number of French banlieues after the death of two teenagers in Clichy-sous-Bois

and international news showed images of burning cars in front of standardized high-rises, Marseille was an exception.

According to architectural historian Florian Urban,

Marseille stuck out as being the only major urban agglomeration that did not experience violent protests in the fall of 2005. This was even more surprising, since Marseille has one of the country's largest proportions of citizens of North African and Middle Eastern descent and a consistently high unemployment rate. The level of racism and marginalisation is certainly not lower than in other parts of France.<sup>16</sup>

Why, then, did Marseille not witness the same kind of protests as other cities in their outskirts like Paris, Lyon or Toulouse? The author suggests that this has to do with urban design. There are relatively few housing estates in Marseille, which means that social segregation is not as distinct.

The status of outsiders and intruders from the periphery, from which the inhabitants of the Paris outskirts frequently suffer, does not apply for Marseille, where the urban design supports a common local identity . . . If not classified as French, the immigrants are at least classified as Marseillais. While this does not prevent them from becoming a target of racism, at least in the fall of 2005 it seemed to have been key in conserving social peace.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, a distinction is to be made between living in the periphery and feeling marginalized. Zielony's images conform to this observation: They show us that, like most things, the question of centre and periphery is a matter of perspective. Besides being rooted in economic and social restrictions as well as the dynamics of urban design, Zielony demonstrates that it is also a matter of choice, of adopting a particular viewpoint.

In a time of critical reconsideration of social dynamics in many aspects of the contemporary society (with movements like "Black Lives Matter", "Me too" or "Time's Up"), it remains questionable that these images have a direct effect of empowerment on the communities represented in them, but they may inspire change in the beholders. They raise questions of habitual viewpoints and obsolete distinctions, of biases and preconceptions ripe for re-evaluation.

Photography can confirm or challenge pre-existing imagery. It is important to circulate images that do not simply reinforce the biased notion of the stereotypical satellite city, as it has been propagated by the 2005 riots. As we have seen, institutional perspectives may change — this is what makes individual contributions like Zielony's so relevant.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

- 1 See des Neiges Léonard, "The Effects of Political Rhetoric," 1097.
- 2 Police officer statement in a documentary on Quartiers Nord: Werth, "Hier kommst du nicht mehr raus."
- 3 Bertho, "The Grands Ensembles," 2.
- 4 See Le Corbusier, *Aircraft*.
- 5 Most mass housing projects did in fact, for a short amount of time, provide relative luxury amidst air, sun and greenery. Their international bad reputation is ascribed to an acute downfall in the quality of life associated with them and consequential news headlines, due mostly to social segregation and a lack of infrastructure and maintenance budgets. Interest in these images is sparked today through knowledge of the failure of this concept and the consequential fall into disfavour it has experienced, especially in the French periphery. See Avermaete, "Komplizen einer modernen Gesellschaft," 34.
- 6 Tobias Zielony in an interview with the author. Munich, October 29, 2016.
- 7 "Ruin lust" describes the joy someone might feel at the sight of decaying architecture. It has lately risen to new popularity with large photographic surveys of the post-industrial ruins of Detroit, to name but one example. See e.g. *The Ruins of Detroit* by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, taken between 2005 and 2010 and published 2010 by Steidl. The book was already in its fifth edition in 2014. See also research platform <https://www.failedarchitecture.com>.
- 8 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
- 9 Strategies and tactics are keywords in de Certeau's writing. For a thorough analysis of their meaning and relevance, see Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau*.
- 10 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
- 11 Bertho, "The Grands Ensembles," 15.
- 12 See Dossmann, König and Wenzel, "'Plattenbau', Later," 41.
- 13 See Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City*.
- 14 See von Schöning, "Ränder des Urbanen," 149.
- 15 Ibid., 148.
- 16 Urban, *Tower and Slab*, 56.
- 17 Ibid., 57.

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